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SUBJECT: "NETIZENS" HAVE THE GUANGDONG GOVERNMENT'S EAR

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: If the Party Secretary can take the time to surf the web for ideas and useful policy proposals, so can you. That's the message from Guangdong Party Secretary Wang Yang to his subordinates, following a recent highly publicized meeting with 26 prominent south China "netizens" (active writers and bloggers in China's online community). The netizens themselves view this injunction as long-awaited acknowledgment of the positive role they and the Internet have to play. In their view, it also attests to the seriousness of Wang's "thought liberation" campaign. Of course, it is possible that the purpose of bringing the netizens into the fold may be to co-opt a potential source of dissent. End Summary.

PARTY SECRETARY APPEARS TO EMBRACE "NETWORK DEMOCRACY"

¶2. (SBU) Party Secretary Wang Yang is reportedly online in a very public fashion, surfing the Internet for input on government policy and to gauge public opinion. During a recent, highly publicized meeting with 26 of south China's most prominent netizens, Wang said he had discovered online that Guangdong netizens are "passionate about social issues and conscientious in safeguarding social justice." He said their voice had become an important force in public discourse and a key reference in Party decision-making. But he also cautioned that the Internet is "a double-edged sword," with both constructive and destructive potential. When used with a correct attitude and appropriately regulated, he said, it can play a very positive role in society. Wang told the netizen group that new "things" like "network democracy" must be embraced, not avoided.

¶3. (SBU) The meeting itself, organized by the Nanfang Metropolitan Daily, south China's most fearless investigative paper (when it's allowed to investigate), was organized after Wang posted a personal Chinese New Year's greeting to Guangdong netizens in February, thereby publicly disclosing his online presence. After Wang was unable to cope with the more than 5,000 replies that flooded his inbox, many of which focused on social issues and government policy, a Nanfang journalist proposed the idea of a meeting with netizens to him on the margins of the National People's Congress in March. He agreed, and Nanfang's editors submitted a list of 26 candidates to the Provincial Government; all were approved for the face-to-face meeting held April 17 in Guangzhou.

¶4. (SBU) Wang told the press that the meeting fostered a new channel through which the public voice can be heard. He also identified several methods by which the interaction would continue: he would invite the netizens to present "their brilliant ideas" once or twice annually; he would encourage the Guangdong Party Committee and

Provincial Government offices to collect the most popular online postings weekly and feed them to senior leaders for analysis and reference in their decision-making; and he would suggest to the Guangdong Party Committee Policy Research Office that they meet with netizens on an ad hoc basis to explore promising ideas. In summary, Wang told the press, "a good system is more important than a good leader, and everyone is welcome to freely provide comments [to the government]."

INNER CIRCLE OF YOUNG, TECH-SAVVY PROFESSIONALS

15. (SBU) The netizens who have been granted this special access all have day jobs: editor-in-chief of a magazine, general manager of an IT firm, professor, entrepreneur. What appears to define their group identity is a common concern over public policy. They are also generally successful, young, tech-savvy professionals who hold college or graduate degrees and who are in reasonably responsible positions for their age. (Comment: Many have been online since they were students, gradually shifting away from video games and chat room romances to "serious" discussion forums and posting sites where they publish their ideas. End Comment)

16. (SBU) The inner circle, the leaders by virtue of the popularity of their online writing and ability to frame the online debate, consists of three Shenzhen editors collectively known as the "Three Musketeers": Deputy Editor-in-Chief of Shenzhen Youth Magazine, Huang Donghe; Editor of the 21st Century Economic Herald, Jin Xinyi; and Editor of Asia Weekly (Hong Kong), Guo Zhongxiao. In 2001, the three pooled their private resources to establish a public policy discussion website called Interhoo.com, which has been one of the

GUANGZHOU 00000292 002 OF 003

primary outlets for their articles and commentary.

17. (SBU) Huang describes Interhoo as a non-profit website aimed at generating solutions to public policy problems, "not just complaints." Local government officials, media professionals, entrepreneurs, and intellectuals make up the bulk of Interhoo's 8,000 registered members. Registration is open and free (even to foreigners), but applicants are required to provide their real names, e-mail addresses, and contact numbers. Interhoo does not fund itself through advertising; rather, the three founders split the annual cost of hosting the site (about 20,000 RMB per year).

18. SBU) Frequently discussed issues on Interhoo fall into three broad categories:

-- networking and career development;

-- local public policy issues, such as development projects, traffic regulation, and migrant population rights; and

-- national issues that effect Shenzhen, including the stock market and housing prices.

Huang said members vigorously discussed the SARS outbreak and attempted government cover-up in 2003. Recent hot button topics include the Olympic Games, the Tibetan riots (netizens by and large supported the government position), and the Sichuan earthquake (the debate centers on the relief effort and blame for shoddy construction of buildings).

GOVERNMENT'S CHANGING VIEW OF THE INTERNET

19. (SBU) Huang and Guo told us that south China's government officials in the late 1990's saw the Internet as a "children's plaything" at best (online games), while many felt it had a negative influence on society, useful only for spreading rumors, negative propaganda, pornography, and false accusations about the government. According to the two netizens, the first shift in thinking about the Internet began in January 2003 when Guo posted his now famous article "Shenzhen, Who Has Abandoned You?" on Interhoo. The article, which discussed Shenzhen's fate as it appeared to be losing

its special status among other thriving mainland cities, seemed to pop-up everywhere online, garnering considerable media attention.

¶10. (SBU) Guo's article attracted the interest of then Shenzhen Mayor Yu Youjun (currently the Vice Minister of Culture in Beijing). Yu and an inspection team from the State Council visited Interhoo to discuss public policy with its founders. According to Huang, the positive nature of those discussions convinced Yu and other local officials to host regular "tea parties" with Interhoo to learn about the policy proposals generated by its members (as edited and presented by the Three Musketeers). Since then, Huang said, government officials in south China have increasingly come to recognize a positive role for the Internet.

¶11. (SBU) The Three Musketeers have continued in their quasi-government advisory role ever since, and to a large extent, they continue to frame the public policy debates in Guangdong and much of the rest of south China. For example, the three have published refined versions of their policy proposals in a series of books subtitled "China's One and Only Non-Government Municipal Blue Paper" (2004, 2006, and 2007), which has become essential reading for every Shenzhen bureaucrat. The most recent article to gain wide notoriety was Jin's "11 Questions for Guangdong, Each Pending an Answer," published online in February 2008. In the article, Jin attempted to pinpoint the most pressing public policy issues in south China. It appears he was successful, given the article's popularity and Wang's recent citation of it to the media as an example of articles that netizens have written that have become important references for Party decision-making.

¶12. (SBU) Huang and Guo both commented that nowadays, owing in part to their roles and Interhoo, government officials take online writers and commentators more seriously. Most recognize the positive contributions they make. Guo said netizens also now have much more freedom of speech, provided they stay away from "the three T's" (Taiwan independence, Tibet independence, and Tiananmen Square). They also asserted that Wang's agreement to meet with the netizens is testament that this change of attitude concerning the Internet has found support at the highest levels of government.

NETIZENS SAY WANG IS SERIOUS ABOUT THOUGHT LIBERATION

GUANGZHOU 00000292 003 OF 003

¶13. (SBU) Congenoff interviewed 4 out of 26 netizens who attended the April 17 meeting with Wang, the theme of which was "Liberate Thoughts and Brainstorm about Guangdong [Development]." All of them agreed that Wang is an open-minded official who is extremely keen to further develop Guangdong, and that this desire is the motivation behind his Thought Liberation Campaign. Huang maintained that Wang realizes that netizens often come up with better policy proposals than his subordinate officials. Guo said that Wang was surprisingly casual and easy-going, and his remarks reflected a deep understanding of network development and other technology issues. Their conclusion: the meeting was definitely "not just a show."

¶14. (SBU) Sunroom Information Industrial Company Deputy General Manager, Hu Zhaohui, whose popular article "When Will Private Companies Be Given National Treatment?" earned him a seat at the table, compared thought liberation to major movements in Chinese history, including the 1919 May Fourth Movement, the 1978 Reform and Opening Up Policy, and Deng Xiaoping's famous trip to south China in 1992 when he called on people to be "more courageous" and "bolder" in carrying out economic reform. According to Hu, thought liberation "is not a hollow slogan; Wang is serious about it." If there were a political motive hidden somewhere behind the netizen meeting, Hu asserted, it would be to increase pressure on Wang's own subordinate's, who are supposed to be implementing his proposals.

COMMENT - CIVIL SOCIETY OR GOVERNMENT COOPTATION?

¶15. (SBU) Each netizen we spoke with painted Wang as an open-minded reformer, serious about further developing Guangdong. It also

became clear that they are all very happy the government finally seems to be taking them seriously. Moreover, they are proud of their newly sanctioned role as a quasi-government think tank, and they clearly enjoy the media attention. However, now that they have attained this elevated status, they may be more reluctant to risk damaging their hard-earned access by publishing unfavorable opinions about the man who granted it or his policies. Wang's motives in meeting with them may have included precluding dissention by elevating the potential dissenters. End comment.

RELATED LINKS AND ONLINE RESOURCES

¶16. (SBU) Articles referenced above are viewable, in Chinese, at the following url's:

--"Shenzhen, Who Has Abandoned You?" Go to:
<http://home.donews.com/donews/article/3/36569.html>

--"11 Questions for Guangdong, Each Pending an Answer" Go to:
<http://www.nanfangdaily.com.cn/epaper/nfds/content/20080229/ArticleT02002FM.htm>

--"When Will Private Companies Be Given National Treatment?" Go to:
http://epaper.nddaily.com/F/html/2008-02/29/content_395899.htm

¶17. (SBU) Websites that the netizens highlighted as essential for understanding political, economic, and social issues in south China include the following: www.nanfangdaily.com.cn, www.interhoo.com, www.oooo.com, www.21cn.com, www.tianya.cn, www.dayoo.com, www.southcn.com, and www.gznf.net.

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